RADHAKRISHNA CHAUDHARY

A Survey of Maithili Literature

(iii) *New Indo-Aryan* — evolved out of Apabhramsa and is represented by modern Indo-Aryan speeches like Assamese, Bengali, Oriya, **Maithili**, Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Gujrati, Kashmiri, Hindi, Marathi, Nepali, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Sindhi and others.

Though evolving out of Magadhi, Maithili agrees with Bhojpuri and other neighbouring languages on several points on which it differs from Bengali, for example, in pronounciation of sounds in general and in declension of stems in particular. In points of morphology, it has some affinity with Avadhi and on this score, it differs from Bengali, Assamese and Oriya and that entitled it to be treated as an independent form of speech. Dr. Subhadra Jha says, "This claim is further supported by the presence in it of certain elements which are wanting in all other NIA language. This is the case specially in conjugation.........it is really an independent language and cannot be included either in Hindi or Bengali as one of the dialects of either of these, and that on the basis of lexicography only".

II

The Script :

The Maithili script, *Mithilakshara* or Tirhuta as it is popularly known, is of a great antiquity. The *Lalitavistara* mentions the *Vaidehi* script. *Brahmi* is considered to be the mother of all Indian scripts. The Maithili script is derived from an eastern alphabet of a variety of the Gupta script. The development of eastern variety has not been clearly shown in Buhler's chart. The proto-Maithili forms were evolved long before the development of the Nagari form which had very little influence on the development Maithili script. The eastern variety is distinct from the days of the Kushanas and the Guptas. Dr. A. F. R. Hœrnle observed that during the Gupta period, the northern class of alphabets was divided into two great sections which may be distinguished as western and eastern sections. Early in the latter half of the seventh century A. D., we find a marked change in the north-eastern alphabet and the inscriptions of Adityasena exhibit this change for the first time and hence forward the eastern

variety develops by itself and becomes the Maithili script—a script which ultimately comes into use in Assam, Bengal and Nepal. Some scholars call it Gaudiya script. This aspect is visible from the inscriptions of the later Gupta kings and of the Pala kings whose inscriptions from north Bihar show the earlier traits of the Maithili script. Epigraphic materials from Vaishali, a copperplate inscription discovered recently from Katra (Muzaffarpur), the Imadpur image inscriptions of the time of Mahipala I and the Naulagarh and Bangaon inscriptions of Vigrahapala III testify to the peculiarities of the early Maithili script. The script of the Andhratharhi Inscription of Shridhara Das is Maithili and an inscription in Maithili character of the time of Akbar has recently been discovered from the Godda Subdivision of the district of Santhal Pargana. The development of Maithili script can be studied from the handwriting of Vidyapati and from the Maithili MSS, preserved in different museums, ranging from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century A. D. The Maithili script of the fifteenth century A. D. can be examined from the two silver coins of Bhairavasimhadeva of the Oinwara dynasty and from the Kandaha and Bhagirathpur inscriptions.

There was a common script throughout the whole of north-eastern India. Manuscripts in Maithili character have been noticed in Tibet by the late Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayana. To most of the Bengali Pandits, who read Sanskrit at Mithila or elesewhere, this script was known as *Tirute* or *Tirhuta*. There was hardly any difference between the old Bengali and Maithili alphabets. The similarity of the Maithili and the Bengali script has led some scholars to describe the former as a copy of the latter. The European scholars of the nineteenth century A. D. described it as the OJHA script, though the form Tirhuta was known to them in 1771. The name *Tirhuta* is derived from Tirabhukti, by which name Mithila was known in the Gupta period. The earliest recorded epigraphic evidence of the script is to be found in the *Mandar Hill Stone inscriptions* of *Adityasena* (c. 7th century A. D.), now fixed in the Baidyanath temple, Deoghar. The next stage of the development of script can be gleaned throgh the terracotta plaque inscription of

the *La. Sam* 67 (in possession of the writer of these lines)—discoverd from Begusarai (Vide R. K. Chaudhary, *Inscription of Bihar*, p. 133). The development of the Maithili script can be studied with the help of the following inscriptions discovered in Mithila, viz. *Shrinagar inscription, Andhratharhi inscription, Asi-Matiahi inscription* of *Vardhamana* of the Vilva-pancha dynasty, *Khojpur Durga image inscription, Tilkeshwara temple inscription*. *Kandaha inscription* of *Narasimhadeva; Bhagirathpur inscription, Barantpur inscription* of Sarva-Simhadeva, *Bideshwara* and *Madhuravanishwar temple inscriptions* and various others. They refer to the various forms of Maithili script through the ages. The MSS of *Baudha Gan O Doha*, the *Kurrukullasawana* (noticed by Rahul Sankrityayan in Tibet), the *Vishnupurana*, the copy of the *Karnaparva* dated La. Sam 327 (1447 A. D.), the *Bhagwata* in the handwriting of Vidyapati, *the Gitagovinda* of Karana Ratipati Bhagat and the judgement, written by Sachal Mishra in the 18th century A. D. are the living specimens of the Maithili script. Thousands of palm-leaf *MSS* give evidence of the fact that the script was extensively used not only in Mithila but in other parts as well.

At this stage, it is not possible to state categorically as to how the *Mithilakshara* or *Tirhuta* script came into being. The script has certain peculiarities of its own which mark its individuality. Originating from the same source, both Bengali and Oriya have comparatively changed but that is not the case with Maithili, though there is a marked difference between the old and the new '*R*'. The *Mithilakshara* begins with 'Anji' and all auspicious work or writing in Mithila begins with this particular sign. '*Anji*' is also prevalent in the Assamese. It is belived to be the sign of *Kundalini*, a serpent shaped divinity that pervades every letter and regulates its pronounciation. '*Anji*' is the symbol of the *Tantric Kundalini* indicating creative energy. The *Trikona, Chhatuskona, Vritta* and *Bindu* of the *Mithilakshara* represent the *Tantric Yantra*. It has peculiar forms for most of its compound letters. Short and long *matras* are distinguished. The alphabet is popularly known as *Kakahara*. It has a descriptive form for each form of letter and had special descriptive epithets to distinguish letters which are similarly pronounced. The

letters end in *Urdhvagati* (in upward strokes). The ornamental style of Maithili writing was archaic. In Mithila, a child begins to read and write with a set formulæ "*Siddhirastu*" (let there be success). We have a reference to this particular word in the *Dohakosha* of Sarhapada. The couplet is as follows.

"Let there be success – the formulæ was my first lesson, but by feeding only on gruel I forgot the alphabet. Now I have learnt only a single letter; but I know not its name, O, my dear".

The script had its beginning in the early years of the Christian era and living epigrapic specimen in the Vaishali region show a marked difference from its western variety of the Brahmi. From the sixth to the twelfth century A. D., it appears that there was almost a common script throughout eastern India, out of which the various scripts of eastern India have developed. The script, current from Varanasi to Assam in those days, was probably the eastern variety of *Kutila*. Some call it proto-Bengali or proto-Nagri though in recent times the theory of *Gaudiya* script is gaining currency. Dr. S. K. Chatterji believes that the alphabets of both Maithili and Bengali have developed out the common script of eastern India in the post-Gupta period. The Tibetan traveller, Dharmaswami, who visited Mithila in the first half of the thirteenth century A. D. and was honoured by the Karnata King, Ramasimhadeva, has mentioned the use of *Vaivarta* script. This was the proto-Maithili script then current in Mithila. It is evident from the inscriptions of Kanaka-bhanga (*JBORS*, II, pp. 355 ff) that upto the fifteenth century A.D. early Oriya and Maithili Scripts were very much similar. Acharya Parmananda Shastri has written an account of the origin of the Maithili script in a number of articles in the various issues of *Mithila Mihira* (Patna) and Pandit Rajeshwar Jha has published a detailed and exhaustive account of the origin and Development of Maithili Script (*Mithilaksaraka Udbhava O Vikasa*, Patna, 1971). Though there are grounds for difference of opinion regarding the theories propounded by him and to which attention has been drawn by Dr. S. K. Chatterjee in his letter (in an explicit manner), the fact remains that the book is the only authoritative published material on the development of Maithili script (incorporating all the latest

researches). Some of his findings are far-fetched and in most cases unacceptable.

Three alphabets, *Maithili, Kaithi* and *Devanagari*, are in use in modern times for writing *Maithili*. The use of *Mithilakshara* is now limited to the Maithil Brahmanas and Karana Kayasthas who use this script on all ceremonial and religious occasions. After independence, the *Kaithi* script has been replaced by the Devanagari character. The use of *Maithili* script is becoming more and more restricted as a large number of writers have begun to use *Devanagari* script for all purposes. Like *Gujrati* and *Marathi*, the *Maithili* writers have opted out for the common Devanagari script. A movement for the revival of the old script is, no doubt, there but there is hardly any chance of replacing *Devanagari* script by *Mithilakshara*, which is getting obsolete day by day.